

Chapter Two

FINDING IDEAS TO RESEARCH

Learning Goals

Discovering topics to study by searching for research ideas and finding existing studies is one of the goals of this chapter. Learning to write a good literature review is discussed, especially in the context of using theory to guide your research. The chapter also raises the ethical issues involved in doing research. By the end of the chapter you should be able to search for topics in the library and in computer databases, write a coherent and focused review of the research literature, and raise the ethical concerns various kinds of research topics might create.

Students often wonder where to begin a research project. Too many times, they have a very large topic that is virtually impossible to study and they need to learn how to narrow it to something more manageable. Understanding how to do a good library search and literature review is an important step in the research process. It often helps to bring in examples of literature reviews from journal articles and show the students what goes into writing them. Too often people begin by summarizing one study after another without any attempt at distilling key themes or organizing them in any coherent way.

All research requires attention to ethics and ethical matters should be a major focus of the discussion. Ethical issues are easily illustrated with actual examples from research studies and by presenting situations that can result in different ethical dilemmas and interpretations. The key goal is to open students' eyes to the impact of what they are doing, not just to have them come up with a definite solution to an ethical situation.

This short chapter can easily be combined with the first one as a good introduction to the initial steps that need to be considered when embarking on a research project. The second chapter shows that the source of a research idea can come virtually from anywhere, but linking it to previous studies, theories, and methods is critical if the project is to be taken as scientifically sound.

Class Discussion Questions

1. Describe a recent event that led you to wonder more about some topic. For example, maybe the last time you went to a party, it made you think about what kinds of people

tend to show up at them. Or you noticed that at the multiplex theaters, people from different racial/ethnic groups were not going to the same movie, so you thought it would be interesting to study who goes to which movies.

2. Are there any research topics or groups of people you would consider always unethical to study?
3. Using a theory you learned in another class, suggest what research topics could be derived from it.

Class Exercises

1. Learning how to use a library's database typically depends on understanding Boolean logic. Show what happens when different combinations of words are used with and without "and", "or", "not" etc. by connecting to your library's database on the computer.
2. Most universities and colleges have an Institutional Research Board (IRB). Perhaps yours can provide some actual examples of proposed research with the permission of the applicants, along with the questions and decisions raised by the IRB. The chair of the IRB might also be willing to make an informal presentation to the class about the IRB's structure and duties.

Answers to Chapter Exercises

Many of these exercises have multiple correct answers and these are just some of the possible ones.

***Interpret:* What Do These Real Examples Tell Us?**

- 1a. The authors use such ideas as strain theory, cultural deviance theory, and social disorganization theory to generate ideas for investigating the links between immigration and crime. Note that the theories are not about immigration but focus on the origins of crime.
- 1b. Deductive since the theories are being used to generate ideas for a study on immigration and crime.
- 1c. For example, using Sutherland's cultural deviance theory, if the immigrant group has distinctive cultural traditions that promote or accept criminal behavior, then we can expect a higher crime rate.

1d. For example, using strain theory, we could ask what are the blocked socioeconomic opportunities faced by immigrants, such as access to education and good schools, discrimination in the job market, or getting lower wages at work.

1e. What is the impact on the immigrants of asking questions about their attitudes toward crime? What if they are illegal immigrants, how can confidentiality be assured? How confidential can we be when asking people about criminal behavior? What privacy issues are at stake if seeking public records or police files?

2a. Anonymity is assured, use of opaque envelope demonstrates that the answers from individuals cannot be seen or read by others and thereby linked to a particular person, people not connected to the particular school are proctoring the survey so confidentiality is further emphasized since they don't know the students personally, permission from parents was sought for their children's participation, names were not recorded again assuring anonymity, respondents were told they could skip questions and thus not forced to participate either in the study or parts of it.

2b. Other ethical concerns: how will the findings be used, given the sexual nature of the survey? How will it be handled for those students who were denied permission by parents to participate, especially if most do complete the survey?

2c. The absence of a signed form could possibly mean that the parents never even saw the form, and never had the chance to deny permission. But asking to deny permission probably results in more students participating. On the other hand, having parents sign to give permission could result in forged permission slips, or forms never returned on time and thus result in fewer participants.

Consult: What could be done?

1. This is a sensitive topic that could be raising issues in the respondents yet to be worked out. Confidentiality needs to be assured and informed consent has to be present before proceeding with such a topic.

2. Is this really voluntary? How safe are they from physical or mental harm?

3. Is this really voluntary when extra credit is offered by a teacher?

4. It would be unethical if respondents did not know what the topic of the survey was and did not have the option of opting out or skipping questions. Otherwise, these are legitimate topics for research.

5. Has permission been granted by parents or guardians for these minors? Given the topic of drug use, is there informed consent, guarantees of anonymity or confidentiality, and discussions of how the findings will be used. Monetary incentives might lead those from lower income backgrounds to participate, thereby making it less voluntary.

6. Is there physical harm in giving people high fat foods, especially if they have not been screened for previous health concerns? Are they participating with informed consent?

7. Nothing unethical unless control group subjects were not debriefed about the placebo. Some people feel that any experiment involving a group of subjects not receiving the treatment is deceptive and should stop as soon as evidence is available that the treatment works. It then should be offered to those in the control group.

8. Issues related to informed consent, written agreement to participate, privacy and confidentiality of responses, anonymity, and methods of debriefing for Internet research introduce new ethical considerations and may not justify posing as someone else.

Decide: What Do You Do Next?

1. Sociology, psychology, social work, and education journals and databases would likely cover topics on friendship.

2. Friends, friendship, homophily, Facebook, breaking up, dating

3. Facebook and other social media websites, even dating matching sites, given that the process of making friends may be the same in some ways as looking for romantic partners.

4. Meeting friends, similarity with friends, ending friendships, psychological outcomes of friendship, social benefits of friendships, gender (race, age, etc.) differences, maintaining friends.

Test Items for Chapter Two

Answers for questions appear in italics.

1. Define the following:

(a) Informed consent: *[providing enough information about the impact of the study so that people can determine whether to give their consent to participate]*

(b) Institutional Review Board: [committee to review the proposed research using a code of ethics that evaluates issues of privacy, potential harm, and informed consent]

(c) Serendipity: [discovering an unexpected finding which leads to new ideas for research]

2. The logic based on binary categories and used to search databases is called:

- (a) Boolean [a]
- (b) serendipitous
- (c) Google
- (d) inductive

3. What is the difference between *anonymity* and confidentiality in research?
[confidentiality is when information identifying respondents can be linked to their responses but is not revealed to anyone but the researchers, and anonymity is when no identifying information about who is participating is available to anyone]

4. Informing people about the main goals and methods of the research after they have participated in the project is called

- (a) informed consent
- (b) deductive reasoning
- (c) debriefing [c]
- (d) serendipity

5. Using specific observations or empirical data to construct a theory is inductive reasoning. True False [true]

6. Which of the following are good sources for an *academic article* (circle all that apply)?

- (a) Newsweek
- (b) American Journal of Sociology [b]
- (c) New York Times
- (d) Social Psychology Quarterly [d]